

Neil Campbell
7/2/2016

Samuel (S): What do you do for them?

Neil (N): I'm a customer service associate. What they call a customer service associate.

S: That's very helpful. That's one of my favorite stores actually. I had a good friend who worked in their gardening area for a while.

N: I expect to be working for another five years and then hitting the road.

S: Hitting the road. Where will you go?

N: My wife is from Spain so I'm hoping to... my wish is to spend part of the year here and be able to see the children and the grandchildren and part of the year over there.

S: Wow. Is everybody in the neighborhood or no?

N: One of the boys is here. The second one lives in Pennsylvania outside of Lancaster, or in Lancaster actually, and our youngest boy is with us at home.

S: Cool. And then where in Spain is your wife from?

N: She's from San Sebastián up in the north, Basque country.

S: Wow. So is she Basque?

N: She is.

S: So Spanish is her second language then or no?

N: English is her second language. Spanish is my second language.

S: Right. She speaks Basque as well right?

N: No because she was raised during the Franco era and they didn't allow...

S: They had opinions about those things.

N: Yes they did. They didn't allow those things back then.

S: Sure. Well that's interesting. How did you guys meet?

N: We met in Venezuela. We worked in the same company.

S: What company was that?

N: Morris Guerera and Sons, which was a manufacturing distributor of a bunch of cosmetic and perfume lines.

S: Now your parents in Cuba owned a company? Was that right?

N: My dad was fortunate enough to come from a, I guess, relatively well to do family so his father gave him the starting capital to purchase a small advertising agency when he graduated from Georgia Tech and he started his business when he was 21 and the business consisted of a central office in Havana. There was an office in Caracas, another one in Mexico City.

S: Is that how you got connected with Venezuela initially?

N: No eventually he worked for a company that, the advertising business evolved over a period of time so he, when we left Cuba it took him about a year and a half to get back into business because he was 45 at that time. And he started with a small agency in Puerto Rico called Robert Otto. Robert Otto was purchased by an international company based out of London called London Press Exchange. And London Press Exchange was eventually purchased by Leo Burnett, which is a large international agency. What they had done was through acquisition was purchased a Latin American branch basically. So he transferred to Caracas to oversee the Latin American operations based out of...

S: Do you mind moving down there? I think the music is going to be... Sorry continue. So your father ended up in Venezuela.

N: So in '71 I guess it was, they transferred him to Caracas.

S: So did you go to high school in Puerto Rico then?

N: No. I graduated from... So the sequence of events is we left Cuba in October of 1960. We spent about a year and a half in Homestead Florida while he was trying to get back into the advertising business, which is a young person's game. Took a while. Again he was offered an opportunity out of San Juan with Robert Otto. From there that company was purchased and he was transferred to New York so we moved to New York. Then when Leo Burnett purchased LPE he was asked to head up the Latin American operations based out of Caracas.

S: I'm going to put this closer. Is that alright?

N: So in '71 he was transferred to Venezuela.

S: And did you go down with him?

N: No I stayed here. I went down in '75 I think it was. '74, '75.

S: What was your father's affinity with Latin America? I mean it seems...

N: Well my grandfather had left his home when he was 15 in Scotland and had worked as a merchant seaman. He liked New York and decided to stay in New York

and start a business and he started a construction business based out of Jersey actually. Union Hill it used to be called then. It's now Union City. And one of the contracts that he was eventually offered was to help build the transway from Miami to Key West, which is the railroad connection which was built out of wood in those days.

S: Is that the road that exists today or no?

N: Not the road. It was the railroad. The trestle if you will. And so he went searching for a wood product that would not rot in salt water. Hence he came to go to Cuba and they were looking for Royal Palm, which grows very tall and straight and doesn't rot in saltwater so that was used as the pilings. And he decided he loved the country and he decided to make his life there. They had three children in Havana. My dad was born in Union Hill. My grandfather had retained the property in the states, which they used as a vacation house if you will. Dad was sent to New York, or my grandmother was sent to New York because she had aborted twice before he was born and my grandfather felt that maybe the medicine in Havana was not quite up to par. So he had her sent north and he was born in Union New Jersey, Union Hill New Jersey.

S: So how old was your grandfather when he arrived in Cuba?

N: It was the late 1800s. I don't know exactly what age he was.

S: Was it after the war?

N: After which war?

S: The War of Independence.

N: Must've been after. Well, I don't know if it was. I'm not sure. I know dad was born in 1915. You know, granddad was well established at that point so probably just after the war I guess.

S: Wow. So you were very much rooted in this community for a long time. You were one of the families, the American families who had been there, with the Skiltons and...

N: Yes. Skiltons and that whole group of friends who rabble roused around Havana. You know, went to the cabarets and saw Hemingway running around all over town and all that kind of stuff. The "good old days." It was a different lifestyle.

S: So your grandfather moved down there and then your father started building a construction or...

N: No that was my grandfather. My father graduated from Georgia Tech at the age of 20 I think.

S: Did he go to school in Cuba before then?

N: Yeah he spent all his life in Cuba.

S: Where did he go to high school?

N: I don't know. I'm sorry. They didn't talk much about that.

S: Was there a lot of resentment afterwards? Or what was the emotion when people talked about Cuba in your household after...

N: Mother was more vociferous about it. Dad was pretty, he was always very reserved and quiet. I never heard him really say anything. I remember sitting on the terrace in the apartment in San Juan when Kennedy decided to enact the embargo or the blockade I guess you'd call it. And I heard him at that point say, "Well it's about time, you know, somebody actually did something." The only mention I ever heard from my dad.

S: Really?

N: I'm sure... it turned their lives around obviously. They went from a rather nice lifestyle of upper middle class to nothing. He was left penniless. Literally penniless. He had to borrow money from us, his Cuban born children, to pay for transit out of the country. They took his house, they took his bank accounts, and they took his business.

S: And your mother talked a little more about it or no?

N: Yeah she was... her father was Cuban and her mother was American.

S: How did they meet?

N: I don't know. I think for some reason he was a CPA in the sugar industry and I guess there was some tie between Georgia and the Atlanta area where my grandmother was from?

S: Do you know what company he worked for?

N: No I don't. It was one of the American sugar companies. I don't know which one.

S: And then was your mother's mother the American. And was she connected with sugar in any way?

N: Well they lived in Camaguey where the sugar plantations were.

S: So as Americans, your grandmother I guess, grew up in Camaguey.

N: As an American, yes. Well she was 15 when she got married so I guess you would say yes to a degree, yes. We used to visit them in Camaguey. In fact we toured the processing plant. Sugar processing plants. I remember the sugar being crushed and the heavy maple coming out of the...

S: In the city of Camaguey?

N: Yeah.

S: Do you have memories of the plantations or just the mill or...?

N: Yeah it was, you know, again I was very young but I remember going and visiting them and the house that they lived in and riding horseback and running free, roaming free. It was a different lifestyle. My mother used to open the door and say, you know, "Get out. And don't come back until it's time to eat." It was a totally different lifestyle.

S: Where did you live in Havana?

N: It was the Miramar area of Havana.

S: And... like a lot of people I've talked to seem to have found a very special connection with either a country club or the Mother's Club. Was there a space for you in your childhood that you remember that you have nostalgia about or...

N: Well I have fond memories of the Biltmore. We'd spend a lot of time at the Biltmore taking tennis lessons and you know we lived in the water to a large degree. Veradero I have fond memories of.

S: Did you guys have a house out in Veradero?

N: No they rented. The family had a farm in Cabañas, which my grandfather had purchased, a small tract of land.

S: What did you grow on the farm?

N: I think he grew some sugar but mostly he had purchased it to... he had the idea about building a stretch of condos basically is what he wanted to do. It was right on the bay. It was a beautiful setting and he was quite progressive I guess for his time and forward thinking.

S: So I'm having trouble imagining, and maybe it's because most of the people I'm interviewing are from Havana, but I would love if you have any images from the sugar plantation, what the lives were like of the people living there, both Americans and non-Americans.

N: Well it was more of a family setting. I don't remember mixing.

S: So were there workers on the farm?

N: On our farm?

S: Yeah.

N: Yeah there were people that lived there. I have memories of Christmas where they dug a pit and killed a pig and roasted lechon asado and how they did it. You know they dug out a pit.

S: So did you hang out with them and eat the pig with them or was it...?

N: Yeah. It was done for the family but they partook as well.

S: Sure. Did you have Cubans who lived with you guys in Havana or no?

N: We did. We had a maid. Her name was Edniña. And I believe she stayed in the house when we left actually, her and her husband. More than likely it was turned over to them.

S: Now a lot of the people I've interviewed have had very close relationships with these maids like they were very instrumental in the raising process. Was that true in your family as well?

N: Yep. I think my mother got upset because I began speaking Spanish before I did English. She didn't care for that too much.

S: Do you and your siblings ever talk about Cuba? I know they're older right?

N: I don't have that close of a relationship with either of my brothers. The eldest one stayed in our house for about ten years actually until not too long ago because he worked out of Trenton. He lives in Nanuette so it was easier for him to come to our house than driving all the way to Nanuette and then to work in the morning. But realistically I don't have a very close relationship with them, either of them for that matter.

S: He lives in Jersey now though?

N: He still lives in Nanuette.

S: I should contact him. Which brother is that?

N: That's Bill. And Ken lives in, where do they live now? I think they still live in... what's the name of the town in Connecticut? It escapes me. It's near Darien, a very well to do community. It'll come to me.

S: Do you... did you ever speak to your children in Spanish with your wife or no?

N: The first born yes. In fact, his primary language was Spanish when he was young. He spoke both but then when he got into the school system, as tends to happen in this country, there was criticism of that because the teachers felt that his English was lacking and he couldn't keep up with his peers. We didn't see it that way but nonetheless we stopped speaking Spanish with them and focused on English. So today the eldest understands quite a bit, speaks it with a heavy American accent. Broken Spanish. The second one understands to a degree, doesn't speak hardly at all.

S: Do you and your wife ever speak to each other in Spanish?

N: All the time. It's, you know, when we met we were in Caracas in a Spanish environment. That's the language that mostly we speak in.

S: And did you, you learned that from the maid and from Ruston? Was Ruston instrumental in that at all?

N: Well I think from the maid originally and then Ruston was bilingual. You know, the environment was Spanish. I spoke English at home but everywhere else basically it was Spanish.

S: Do you have any memories of Ruston?

N: Very few.

S: How do you... How do you feel your lives were different than... like I'm trying to figure out the space occupied by the American colony down there, or the ABC community, and I'm trying to find out because it seemed to have been it's own little society within Cuba. Would you say that's accurate?

N: I think that's fair. There were obviously Cubans involved but it was a certain, if I could use the phrase, class if you will, a social class of upper middle class is really what it was.

S: Was it elite Cubans or not really?

N: I guess you could term it that way. They had a certain economic level if you will.

S: Did your family have any Cuban friends?

N: Yeah. Sure. I remember going to birthday parties of Cuban friends with my cousins. Sure. It wasn't exclusively American. That was not the case. I don't think my parents ever... my mother was a strange fish. She would rant about Latin Americans, Cubans and Latin Americans in general, when she lived in the states. And when she lived overseas she would rant about Americans.

S: Right so this nostalgia...

N: Polyester Pete, you know, didn't know how to treat people, didn't know how to dress, etc. etc. So she had her prejudices obviously. Dad was again was very reserved. I don't think he ever considered himself to be... He considered himself to be an international person, really is what he was. He traveled so much that that was just part of his environment. He was equally at ease in either environment.

S: And they both spoke very good Spanish I'm sure. Your mother was half Cuban so that's interesting that...

N: They were both fluent. Always.

S: Was that her dealing with her own identity do you think? How do you...?

N: What her prejudices?

S: Yeah her nostalgia for whichever place she wasn't.

N: It may have been. It may have been yeah. I think she was... I don't know. Her American influence was from the south. So that's a different context I think.

S: Where in the south is her family from?

N: Georgia. Atlanta.

S: Did you guys go to church?

N: Yeah we did. Methodist church. But you know my mother's siblings and there were a few of them, let me see... Sadie... Mimi, Sadie, Lillian and John. So there were five of them and each of them had varying degrees of integration into the Latin culture.

S: And they all lived in Havana?

N: Yes. If you saw my uncle John, he was the only boy, her brother, and he was a typical Latin playboy. Little mustache.